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TEACHING THE PARAGRAPH

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The most practical way to teach anyone to write is to have him write numerous paragraphs. For the paragraph is really an essay in little, yet contains every element contained in an essay in large; and it exemplifies all the principles of structure exemplified in an essay in large. In writing a good paragraph, as necessarily as in writing a good essay, one must choose, limit, and word his subject; gather, select, and mass his material; write, revise, and rewrite his creation. Yet the paragraph because of its small and convenient compass may be written, abused, destroyed, and rewritten; whereas the complacent bulk of a complete essay deters one from mutilating it and frightens one from rewriting it. The paragraph, too, since it is so small in compass, can be easily conceived and managed by the young student who would get lost in the mazes of the essay, and it can be quickly and definitely corrected by the teacher. A daily paragraph is a not unthinkable classroom practice.

The English teacher of the old school, nurtured in the rhetorical sunshine of Alexander Bain, succeeded in teaching pages of rhetoric but not much writing. He gave an abundance of attention to *rules* of writing and not enough to *habits* of writing; he had too much concern with the ancient canons of traditional rhetoric and not enough with the needs of practical life. He never realized that creative work precedes and frequently scorns critical work. He never succeeded in getting his students to write freely and naturally, but did succeed in creating an overdecorated kind of exotic and flowery jargon, known as "high-school English." He made much of the four kinds of discourse: narration, description, argumentation, exposition; he taught the writing of each separately; and he was so delighted by the logical completeness of this Aristotelian division that it never occurred to him that it is as impossible to write unadulterated exposition as to breathe unadulterated oxygen;

and that the rules of writing good exposition vary not one iota from the rules of writing good description or argumentation.

His method was divergent instead of convergent; analytic instead of synthetic. He taught *from* instead of *to*. He gave the definitions of and the rules of coherence, mass, unity, development by obversion; he gave golden examples of these golden rules culled from the golden classics of golden ages. He left the student memorized rules and indelible definitions of hazy and inapplicable ideas. He hampered his students from the start with critical details and he confused them pitifully. He never helped them to find something to say by showing them that they had something to say. Thought and idea meant little to him. Rule and form and convention governed his microcosm.

He taught them to outline painfully and thus put a handicap on fluency. Instead of allowing them to write he compelled them to erect pretty architectural edifices. He inspired them to torture and hammer their ideas so as to make them fit unto the I's, A's, sub 1's, and sub 2's. The more sub 1's and 2's a student could squeeze from his thought the better. They made a pretty outline. Luckily generous Providence suggested an antidote to most students. When they were assigned a theme to be first outlined and then written, they first wrote their theme and then outlined it. Spontaneity was to some extent saved. The teacher saw both the theme and the outline. He felt good. True, *he* never used an outline when *he* wrote—but the pupils were learning to. It is comforting to realize one's self in progeny or pupils.

James (*Psychology*, I, 259) says:

There is some topic or subject about which all the members of the thought revolve. Half the time this topic is a problem; a gap we cannot yet fill with a definite word, picture, or phrase, but which influences us in an intensely active and determinate psychic way. Whatever may be the images and phrases that pass before us, we feel their relation to this aching gap. To fill it up is our thought's destiny.

The way to teach the paragraph to young students is right there. Put firmly aside all the classical doctrines and dogmas of Quackenbos and Minto and Bain and their devoted disciples. Then bring to the consciousness of the student a topic, a problem, and

set the members of his thought revolving about it. Say to him: Do you think the Feudal System had any advantages? What were they? Can you state each in a sentence? Can you prove the following sentence? The Feudal System had many advantages.

The pupil has written a paragraph. Can he define topic sentence? Probably not, but he has one. Can he define unity? coherence? mass? selection? No! But has he violated them? Does he know whether he wrote an argumentative or an expository paragraph? What is to prevent its being called either? Does he know that he developed the paragraph by the method of "giving particulars"? Why should he? The young student wants to learn writing, not metaphysics. He wants to form habits, not to memorize definitions. Give him a thought, a vital thought, one which calls to him, "Here I am, complete me!" and he will develop it in spite of his ignorance of:

Development by

1. Definition
 - a) What a thing is
2. Obversion
 - a) What a thing is not
3. Comparison
 - a) What a thing is like
4. Contrast
 - a) What a thing is not like
5. *Ad infinitum*

The teacher need not, however, deny the pupil the opportunity to practice the many methods of paragraph development. But the method of development should always be suggested by the central thought of the paragraph and need not even be named. Here are some central thoughts. See how they proclaim their own methods of development.

1. *Hard study pays*: Who will not immediately think of an illustrative story?

2. *Death is not all horror and sorrow*: Who can help using the method of obversion? And who can resist smiling at the contrast between the simplicity of the process and the pomposity of its name?

3. *All men are created equal.* Equality here has a peculiar meaning. Even a decadent poet must go ahead by defining equality. Even Chesterton must employ the method of definition.

4. *Selfishness is the cause of most unhappiness:* This shouts: "Develop me by cause and effect!"

And so it goes. Give the student a central thought, vital, impulsive. Discuss it with him. Weed out extraneous matter. Clarify it. Make him feel the problem. Then let him write, and he will produce a paragraph. James was right. To fill up the problem is our thought's destiny.

We agree then upon the following: (1) Present to the student a fundamental thought. (2) Let him see it from many points of view. (3) Let him clarify it and unify it by discussion. (4) Let him introduce it by a sentence. (5) Let his outline be a simple and informal jotting down of facts or ideas. (6) Let him complete his thought in writing. (7) Criticize with the employment of a minimum of technical, rhetorical nomenclature.

In the later years of high school certain problems present themselves. Here are suggested solutions in brief.

I. HOW TO TEACH THE SHIFTING OF THE TOPIC SENTENCE

1. Write a paragraph.
2. Would it be better to place the topic sentence in the middle? at the end?
3. Why? Does it serve as a summary? Does it leave a stronger impression? Does it make the beginning more interesting? Does it form a climax at the end? etc.

II. THE PROBLEM OF THE VIOLATION OF UNITY

In spite of the pedagogue of the old school, this is rarely a problem at all. How many pupils violate the law of emphasizing only one thought? A young student has a single-track mind. He finds it as hard to commit duality or plurality as to mix his metaphors. Youth is the age of monotheism. Horrible examples of paragraphs which violate unity are generally the frenzied creations of those textbook writers who seek new illustrations for scholastic vanities.

III. THE PROBLEM OF MASS

1. What are the most arresting parts of a paragraph? 2. Have you put your most interesting material there? 3. If not, put it there.

IV. THE PROBLEM OF COHERENCE

1. Do your sentences hang together?
2. Why not cement them by some conjunction?

In all cases emphasize the practical, the common sense, the useful; neglect the formal, the hair-splitting, the theoretical.

And the next time you have a few moments to spare ask a real, live editor for an interview. He may grant you one. If he does, ask him to tell you three ways of gaining clearness; four ways of gaining emphasis; and five ways of developing a topic sentence. Retreat before he recovers.